

Soft Epilogue

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Summary: Sequel to "Juliet." Jeff visits Annie in DC.

1. Chapter 1

_ "I think we deserve _

_a soft epilogue, my love. _

We are good people

_and we've suffered enough." _

Seventy Years of Sleep #4. Nikki Ursula

* * *

><p>He said he's getting here at 3 and it's 3:01. Where is he?</p>

Annie rolls up onto her toes and cranes her neck and still can't really see over the crowd. She wishes it could be like in the movies; she wishes the crowd could just part like the Red Sea and there he'd be, grinning and waving, and there'd be plenty of space for them to run and greet and he'd pick her up and spin her around and

"Watch it!" A middle-aged woman pushes past, dragging her small child by the hand through the crowds and - rudely - interrupting Annie's fantasy.

"Sorry," she mutters to the woman's back, though she is still mildly offended.

3:04 now.

Maybe he's not coming after all, maybe he just said it to humour her

and now the joke's gone on far enough that he couldn't back out and he's sitting in his office at Greendale wondering how to break the news.

Maybe she got the time wrong and he actually arrived at 2 and wondered why she wasn't there and now he's off in some bar somewhere, thinking the worst of her.

Oh God, maybe his plane got in a crash and the airport just hasn't announced it yet and he's lying there bleeding and helpless and she's thoughtlessly berating him for being late-

No.

Of course not, don't be ridiculous.

She shakes her head in a fruitless attempt to stop conjuring these scenarios in her head.

(Spoiler alert, doesn't work.)

3:06.

She could go get coffee or something. He would probably understand, right?

3:07.

She checks the terminal for the third time since her arrival. Yes, she's in the right place, yes, she's here at the right time, no, he's still not here yet.

3:10 and she's about to phone him.

That is, until she hears a familiar call of "Annie?"

"Jeff?"

"Annie?"

She balances on her tiptoes again, scanning the crowd. There! He's standing to the side, watching the people who walk past in increasing confusion, and her stomach twists a little when she realises it's _her _he's looking for, _her _he looks so lost without.

So she allows herself to preen at the attention for a short moment before sticking her arm in the air and waving frantically.

"Jeff!"

He catches sight of her, then, finally, and takes off, sheer determination in his stride. There's about 5 feet between them when something in his gaze roots her to the spot.

It's something like hope and also fear, but Annie doesn't know what exactly he's so scared of - is it her, orâ€¦ Whatever might happen when they finally meet?

(Because she totally understands his fear. Of _that. _ She's spent quite a lot of time thinking about _that, _and even though most of

the scenarios are exhilarating and exciting and make her heart flutter like a kid with their first love, some of them are pretty terrifying.)

"Hey," he greets her when they're close enough to talk without yelling. His voice is slightly breathless and wonderfully clear, nothing like the static-y, tinny sound from their phone calls.

"Hi," she tries to tamp down the manic grin spreading across her face.

The corners of his mouth twitch until he's grinning, full-blown, just as madly as she is, and before she can do anything he's wrapping her up in a hug in a botched attempt to hide his face.

Warm. Firm. Soft sweater. Scratchy stubble against her neck.

It occurs to her that she's been holding her breath, and when she lets it out it sounds like a sort of broken sigh, but he must empathise with something in the noise because he pulls her closer, nuzzling his face at the point where shoulder meets neck.

When they finally pull apart the absence is a shock. Was it always so cold in here?

"Annie," it sounds like a prayer.

"I missed you." She has to step back a little to see his face.

It sort of reminds her of the last night of First Year, when he pulled away and she took her chance. The memory is bittersweet.

Should she kiss him now? Wait for him to kiss her? Does he want her to?

He looks as though he might be wondering the same things. But: "Do you know the number for the local cab service?"

"What?"

"Cab." He rattles the handle of his small suitcase. "Need to get to my hotel, right?"

"Oh. Right." She licks her lips. "Hotel, right."

Distracted, she scrolls through the contacts on her phone and relays the cab number to him.

He programs it into his cell, but doesn't call right away. Instead he is staring at her, a slight furrow in his brow.

"Do you want to meet up once you've settled in?" Mentally, she berates herself for sounding like a concierge.

"Yeah - that'd be nice."

"Good."

Jeff starts walking - for him, the exit doors are probably in sight -

so she has to trot along beside him until she gets the pacing right. They soon fall into step, and if she looks at him out the corner of her eye it almost seems like they're back at Greendale again, walking to class or teaming up to solve a conspiracy they secretly caused themselves.

They reach the automatic doors and step out into the sunlight. It's a warm day with little breeze, but something compels Annie to pull her cardigan tighter around her.

Though she wants to say something, anything really, she stays quiet as he dials for a cab. The hotel address seems a little familiar. According to her mental map, it'll be a couple blocks away from her favourite park.

"Soâ€| How was your flight?"

"Boring. Cramped. There's no leg room at all."

She nods even though she can't really relate.

"I couldn't wait to see you."

!

"I'm really glad you're here."

He does a curt little nod and shoots her a crooked smile, and she knows he feels as awkward about this whole thing as she does.

There's really no plan for the next week. Even after speaking on the phone and confessingâ€| thingsâ€| The next few conversations until now were mostly about his flight, about what time and day he'd be getting here and whether or not he should settle for a Holiday Inn or splurge on something nicer.

But now what? Jeff's here, in DC, close enough to touch, but she doesn't know. Does he even want her, the way she wants him? He booked a separate hotel after all (not that she wasn't expecting him to! but she kind of thought. well.) and now he's just benignly agreeing to vague plans for the evening (seriously there's no agreed time or place or anything) and. Um.

"Is 6 okay?"

"Wha. What?"

"For later."

"Oh. Yep."

His gaze lingers on her for a moment like he's expecting her to say something else.

Maybe it'll help if she does. "Um. There's a little coffee place near your hotel. I think." (She doesn't think. She knows. But he doesn't have to know she researched his hotel.)

"Sure, sure." But he still has that _look, _like he wants something

more.

* * *

><p>So the rest of the afternoon is spent unproductively.</p>

At first she reads, and it works for a little while but she's barely 3 chapters in when the nagging feeling overcomes her and she leaps to her feet, storms over to her closet, and rips the doors open.

What should she wear? What will _he_ be wearing? What is appropriate for this encounter? _What_ _is_ this encounter?_

Maybe a sundress. He always liked her in sundresses, right?

But then she tries one on (garishly pink, crowded flowers, suddenly too obnoxious) and when she looks in the mirror, she sees her 20-year-old self staring back.

Nope. No-go.

She wants to be taken seriously. She wants to look like an adult woman, capable of making her own decisions. Not a silly teenage girl in cutesy clothing.

By process of elimination, that leaves about half of her closet. Great, then.

It takes her a while (a long, _long_ while - after, she hardly has time to do her hair) but by the end of it she's standing in front of her mirror in a simple red dress (which she totally wore to her internship interview, but whatever) and feeling like maybe the evening could go well. It's casual enough to wear to a Starbucks but nice enough to seem like date-clothes, and her hair falls in light waves over her shoulders and no matter how much she scrutinises herself, she hasn't really found anything to change.

* * *

><p>Perhaps the only useful thing indoctrinated into her by her family was the advantages to arriving 5 minutes early for every meeting, interview, or gathering, however informal.</p>

However sometimes she worries about being too late for the 5 minutes, and sets out with an extra 5 minutes to spare, resulting in arriving at the location 10 minutes early.

This is one of those occasions.

Fortunately, it's still pretty nice outside - slightly windy, but it's DC, whatever - so she perches on the edge of one of the metal seats outside the little cafe instead of going inside.

Jeff promised to be there on time, though there is still a small part of her that doesn't really expect him to show up at all. Not that she doesn't have faith in him! But habits are hard to break, right? That's probably it.

The minutes slowly tick by and she's bouncing her leg, hearing the swishy fabric of her skirt slide over her legs with each twitch.

At 7 minutes she begins to reconsider her whole outfit. The colour of her dress seems just too out-of-place for a casual little cafe like this.

At 8 she wonders whether it's really wise to wait outside - maybe she should go in and order a drink, to make it look as though she didn't just wait for him for 10 minutes.

At 9 she stands but doesn't really move, hovering by the metal table and straining her eyes to try to spot him in the distance.

Finally at 9 and a half minutes he's there. He doesn't spot her at first, instead staring straight ahead with a little furrow in his brow, like he's worried.

And she's sort of glad he doesn't see her, 'cause it gives her a little time to just watch him. Watch him and listen to her own heartbeat (it's suddenly so very loud in her ears, echoing in her head) and. And just. Love him.

She loves him.

It occurs to her as naturally as a simple observation about the weather.

It's true. She loves him and she used to love him and maybe she didn't for a while or maybe she never stopped, but nevertheless she loves him now and he's here, with her, really here, and perhaps in the not-too-distant future she'll get a chance to share this revelation with him.

The thought gives her shivers.

Jeff's eyes find hers, locked even over the short distance, and he shoots her a little smile as he makes his way over.

She is unsure of what to do with her hands, so leaves them twitching at her sides, pulling at her skirt and plucking at nonexistent threads.

"Sorry." Is his first word. "I thought we were gonna meet at 6?"

"Oh! Yeah. Sorry - I accidentally got here early."

"What a uniquely Annie Edison problem."

"Ha. Yeah."

"Um." He ducks his head like he's self-conscious or something, which totally doesn't make sense because he looks amazing. She likes to think she knows him well enough by know to know that he might just have spent as much time picking out an outfit as she did.

He looms over her, not saying anything, and she has to kind of crane her neck a little to see him but their eyes meet anyway and she loves him, she loves him, she loves him.

She's in grave danger of saying as much when he clears his throat.

Moment over.

"We should, uh. Go in?"

"Sure, sure."

It's awkward because _of course _he had to stop it - these kinds of things happen a lot (_happened_ a lot?) and most of the time it is him who backs out first.

But then, this time doesn't exactly feel like that. It's awkward, yes, but more of a mutual sort of awkwardness - what just happened, what is currently happening, isn't just one-sided. She isn't imagining things.

Its just a cafe get-together, nothing fancy, nothing official. They order drinks. He offers to pay. She politely declines. They sit. They sip. They say nothing for a while until they feel comfortable enough to break the silence.

"So."

"So."

"We should probablyâ€|"

"Yeah."

"I missed you." He runs a hand through his hair, destroying the undoubtedly carefully crafted style.

"I missed you, too."

"Annieâ€|" He cuts himself off with a weary sigh. "What's the agenda here? We need to talk, I know that, but - what first?"

"First?" Seeing him all wound up like this is significantly less amusing than she always thought it would be.

"Yeah. Like, last time we called - last week - you said we had to talk about - about Grace - before anything else. Happened."

"Uh-huh." She shifts in her seat. So. _That. _

In all honesty, she's forgotten everything she wanted to say. At the moment she doesn't particularly want to talk, or sit in a dead cafe where the empty atmosphere just makes everything seem so much more awkward.

She wants - has wanted, ever since he arrived, really - to touch him. And kiss him and feel his hands cup her face and run around DC with him and. Um. Other things.

_Later. _

"Um. Grace. It wasn'tâ€| You shouldn't - ugh."

"We don't have to - I mean, if you don't want to -"

"No. Just." She sighs. "Part of me knows I should scold you for spontaneously dumping her. Like Britta would. Female solidarity and all that. But I alsoâ€œ I don't know. It's selfish, but I'm also sort of happy you broke up with her, for- " For what? For _her? _Is it reasonable for her to hope that much? "For - To come here."

He nods, slowly, pensively. "Look: My whole, uh, relationship with Grace, was justâ€œ It wasn't real, for me, anyway. I just sort of - got with her, 'cause it seemed like the thing I should be doing. Y'know, accept my life and my age and everything that happened, everyone who left, and try to finallyâ€œ I don't know. Become an adult."

"Was she okay with it?" She winces at her own choice of words. _Of course Grace wouldn't be _okay _with it. Even if the relationship was only fleeting, break ups are always hard._

"She was alright, I think. A little mad at first, but she cooled down. Said she was glad I ended it before she introduced me to her kid."

"Ah."

"I just - I felt bad, 'cause I thought she was maybe more invested intoâ€œ itâ€œ than I was." He looks up, stares her straight in the eye for a moment before downcasting his eyes back to the sticky table. "Honestly, the entire time I was with her, all I could think about was you. And I thought that might go away after a while, but then it just became more and more frequent, andâ€œ " He shrugs his shoulders helplessly, and, yeah - she really, _really _wants to touch him right about now.

"I thought about you, too, you know."

He shoots her a tiny smile, almost bashful. A smile that tips her over the edge, has her sliding her hand across the gross table and meeting his.

* * *

><p>Jeff is almost permanently in a state of disbelief about the state of his life. Usually, this is a negative thing - he can hardly believe that, after everything, he is stuck teaching at Greendale Community College.<p>

Other times - very, very rare times, mind you - it all seems more positive. Right now, for example, he can hardly believe that, after everything, he is _on a date with Annie Edison. _

And it is a date. And there was some confusion about that, but thankfully that got cleared up after the first 15 minutes. Annie likes labels, after all, and contrary to popular belief, he doesn't have much of an aversion to them, himself.

It's not exactly what he was expecting when he stalked through the airport, some time earlier. Ever since their last phone call - the night before his journey - he had, privately, been building up to rejection. He imagined the scenario so many times in his head that, when he concentrated hard enough, he could practically hear her saying the words. Sweet apologies and explanations of

misunderstandings and _it's not you, it's me. —

But now he's sitting across from her in some dingy cafe, draining the last dregs of his cheap coffee, watching her talk about her latest intern assignment and basking in the silent knowledge that this probably won't be the last experience of this kind that they'll share.

There's potential for more.

There _will_ be more.

* * *

><p>It just seems to make sense that she goes with him when the cab pulls up outside. It was the most natural step, what with the handholding and lingering glances and completely-adorable-oh-my-god tiny little smiles.

In fact, it's only when they're sitting in the back of the black cab, watching the other cars fly by and the buildings rush back, that it actually hits her.

_She's going back to his hotel room. _The thought suggests itself in a calm sort of voice.

This is definitely the kind of thing she would freak out about, a couple of years back. A couple months, even.

But right now, the realisation comes with an acceptance. This is what makes sense. This is what is happening. This is what _should happen.

"Are you freaking out just now?" He punctuates this with quirk of one eyebrow, clearly trying to convey sarcasm.

"Mm. No. Maybe." At the small flash of panic in his eyes, she hastily adds: "Not about you. Or - or _this. _Just. I don't know."

"We can get out, if you want. I could walk you back to your apartment."

"No." It comes out harsher than she had intended, but no matter. "I don't. I mean, I want this. Really." she squeezes his hand, loosely clasping her own, and it's enough to settle the matter, for now.

2. Chapter 2

The sun is slowly going down by the time they reach his hotel. On the scale of living-out-of-his-car to highly-esteemed-defense-lawyer, it's a little below Greendale-professor levels.

Which, for reference, makes it a Holiday Inn.

He's staying at a Holiday Inn.

(Which normally would depress him, but he can't really complain about the situation right now - holding hands with Annie, walking with

Annie through the reception area, riding the elevator to his floor with Annie, pushing open his door one-handed and stepping into his room withâ€| Withâ€|)

"Annie?"

She makes a little humming sound in the back of her throat, craning her neck a bit to stare up at him. Though it's not really necessary, she stays close.

It suddenly occurs to him that they haven't even kissed yet, and he only arrived in DC less than 6 hours agoâ€| Fuck, and he just up and dragged her back to his hotel room like an idiot. Does she even want this? (Does she even want _him_?)

"Sorry, we should- I mean. I."

"What?" Shit, he hopes he's only imagining the way her eyes narrowed just there.

"You - And - Annie, we haven't even kissed yet."

"So?" He's definitely _not_ imagining the way she moves away slightly, shifting backwards so there's more than just a few inches of space between them.

"So-" How does she not see the problem here? "We're _here_! In my hotel room!" —

"Are you really so upset about that?" She looks vaguely insulted, and maybe a little confused. "Jeff-"

"No, it's just. There's all these - these _implications_. I don't want you to think I planned this - I didn't mean for-"

"I never thought you planned this or anything," she attempts to reason, voice soft. God, she's talking to him like he's a child - not surprising, given the way he's freaking out right now. "And, we can definitely take things slow. We don't have to do - anything - tonight, if you don't want to."

Now she probably pities him. Or is mentally planning an escape route for the second he turns his back. Or is wondering why she ever invited him to DC in the first place. Fuck.

She squeezes his hand (shit, and she was holding it the entire time and it's probably all gross and sweaty now-) and tries to meet his eyes. When she succeeds, she explains, "I just want to spend time with you. All the other stuff doesn't really matter."

She's so smart. And though he doesn't exactly believe in her sentiment, he definitely believes in _her_.

So he squeezes her hand right back, and tries to forget about the rest.

* * *

><p>She wasn't so sure before, but now Annie gets it. He wants her as much as she wants him. And everyone knows she's always been a sucker

for emotionally vulnerable!Jeff, even though the current circumstances aren't the greatest.<p>

And she totally respects that he's overwhelmed - truthfully, so is she - but right now, she needs to touch him.

How does one ask the person they're in love with to kiss them without sounding too desperate?

'Cause, yeah, she's done it before. They've done this before, but last time, it was a kiss for the end of Everything, and now, it's the exact opposite.

In an ideal world, she would have said something simultaneously subtle and quietly romantic. What comes out instead is, "Kiss me?"

Spoiler alert, the outcome is just as nice.

Jeff quirks his eyebrows and opens his mouth, probably to make a joke, but soon thinks better of it. Rather, he reaches out the hand not currently holding her own to cup her cheek. Eyes searching, possibly for confirmation?

So she holds his stare and tries to convey through expression the mantra of _YES, yes, yes, yes, YES, please!_ that is presently running through her mind.

Something must click, because suddenly he's kissing her, all soft and sweet, and God, it's just as amazing as the other times.

Though she really wishes he'd stop being so careful, stop touching her as if she'll break if he's not gentle enough.

That thought slips her mind, however, as she slides a hand up to his chest. Warm. Firm. Soft sweater. Like before, in the airport, but also like _Before_, back home. She can feel the rapid thump of his heart and wonders if he knows he's having the very same effect on her.

She lets out a little sigh, which prompts him to press his lips a little more firmly to her own. It's like she's floating.

They both seem pretty content to stay like this for a little while, and so they do, until Annie's neck goes a little numb from craning, and Jeff's fingers twitch where they're intertwined with her own. At that point, they break apart, all bashful smiles and fluttering breaths and beating hearts.

"We should - slow down." Jeff suggests, in a tone implying that he would probably rather do the exact opposite, but knows, begrudgingly, that this is the best way.

"Yeah." Annie agrees breathlessly, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

He cocks his head in the direction of the bed - less than a foot away - and asks, simply, "Do you wanna watch TV?"

"Sure." She watches as he busies himself with the remote, flopping

down onto the bed when he's flicked the set to life. He raises an eyebrow at her comfortable, spread-out position, before sidling past the bed and taking a seat in the nearby armchair.

Well, then.

"Y'know, when you said we should watch TV, I kind of thought you meant, watch TV together."

"This is together." He deflects. "We're together right now."

Instead of dignifying his attempted lawyering with a reply, Annie scoots over a little, before patting the new space next to her.

"Annie, I'm trying to be a gentleman, here."

"Ugh." She makes a big show of rolling her eyes. That'll show him. "I'm pretty sure we can sit next to each other for a while withoutâ€¦ Doing anything." Ignoring the last little stumble, she continues: "You're not that charming or - ah - irresistible."

"No, but you are." He responds easily.

Of course, it melts her heart. She clamps her lips shut, tight, lest she accidentally slips up and tells him what is currently running through her mind.

I love you I love you I love you

"I guess I can move," he concedes, letting out an exaggerated put-upon sigh as he sinks down onto the mattress. After a moment of shifting: "Happy now?"

"Mm-hm." She's staring at her hands. God, she just wants to touch him again.

"Let's seeâ€¦" He murmurs, perhaps mostly to himself. Over the next minute she sees the colours of the screen flicker and change out of the corner of her eye. When he finally settles on a channel, he explains, "Weekend At Bernie's."

Annie finds her nose wrinkling in distaste. "This movie's gross."

"We can find something else if you wantâ€¦?"

"No." She shakes her head, remembering. "Troy used to love it. We should watch it. In his honour."

"He's not dead, Annie."

"I know. But - he's not here. And who knows how many chances he'll get to watch this when he's out at sea, travelling the world?"

"Huh. Alright, then." He sets the remote on the bedside table, before shifting a little on the bed. Is it only her imagination, or does he move closer?

The film seems to be already around 20 minutes in and a slightly

boring, dialogue-heavy scene plays on the screen. It is difficult to concentrate like this - being able to see him in her peripheral vision, knowing that if she just slides over a couple of inches, they would practically be pressed shoulder-to-shoulder.

And so it goes.

Every so often a joke will land, and she will feel surprised and slightly guilty from actually finding it sort of funny. Though Troy would be pleased, Britta and Shirley would definitely be more reproachful.

However when it gets to the more gritty parts, it's difficult to hide her discomfort. When Bernie's body lands on the beach with a dull thud, Jeff notices her wince.

"We really don't have to watch if you don't want to." He reminds her, tilting his head to the side. His stare is equal parts amused and concerned.

"I do_ want to." She dutifully trains her eyes back to the movie.

However, after a few minutes, she feels his thumb brush her pinkie. She waits until it happens a second time to make sure it wasn't a (lovely, beautiful) fluke, before gently sliding her hand over his.

Their fingers intertwine: her small hand clasped tightly over his, and when Annie looks up, her companion's gaze is warm, soft. The sort of look she could melt into. Maybe she already has.

And it's invitation enough to shift over, just barely, just enough for their arms to touch and for her to rest her head on his shoulder.

The rest of the movie doesn't seem so bad.

End
file.